

CONE HEAD

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In the spring of 1970, when I was twenty-two, I was arrested by the Orono, Maine, police. After a traffic stop, I'd been discovered in possession of some three dozen rubber traffic cones. After a hard night of drinking Long Island Iced Tea at the University Motor Inn, I had struck one of these traffic cones while driving home. It bounced up under the car and tore off the muffler of my ancient Ford station wagon. I had noticed earlier that the town of Orono had been painting crosswalks that day, and now realized they'd left their damn traffic cones all over the place. With a drunk's logic, I decided to cruise around town—slowly, safely, sanely—and pick up all the cones. Every single one. The following day, I would present them, along with my dead muffler, at the Town Office in a display of righteous anger.

The Orono police, who already had reasons to dislike me (I was a notorious anti-Vietnam War “hippie”), were delighted with their catch. The arresting officer found enough cones in the back of my station wagon to elevate the bust into the category of larceny. Only I knew that I'd actually been caught on my second cone run. Had I been caught with the hundred or so already stashed in my apartment building, perhaps we would have been talking grand larceny.

Months passed. I graduated from the University of Maine. With a potential larceny conviction hanging over my head, I looked for a teaching job. But jobs were scarce, and what I got instead was a gig pumping go-juice near the town of Brewer. My boss was a woman. I don't remember her name, but we'll call her Ellen. Ellen didn't know I had a trial for larceny in my future. For the minimum wage she was paying me (I think it was a dollar-sixty an hour), I didn't feel she was entitled to know.

There was a price war going on at the time, and we at Interstate 95 Gas were selling regular at twenty-nine cents a gallon. But wait, folks, there's more. With a fill-up, you got your choice of the Glass (an ugly but durable diner-style water tumbler) or the Bread (an extra-long loaf of spongy white). If we forgot to ask if we could check your oil, you got your fill-up free. If we forgot to say thank you, same

deal. And guess who would have to pay for the free fill-up? That's right, the forgetful pump jockey, who, in my case, was half past broke already; dinner in those days often consisted of Cheerios fried in lard with a cigarette chaser.

I had by then met Tabitha Spruce, of Old Town, and asked her to marry me. She had agreed, contingent upon my finding a slightly better job than pumping off-brand gasoline. I could understand that. Who wants to marry a guy whose largest responsibility is asking customers whether they prefer the Glass or the Bread?

Comes August of 1970, and my trial for cone theft. I tell Ellen I won't be able to make it to work that afternoon because a relative of my fiancée has died ("fiancée" sounds so much more responsible than "girlfriend") and I have to take her to the funeral. Ellen appears to buy this. And indeed there is a funeral of sorts, but it turns out to be mine. I serve as my own lawyer in Bangor District Court, but have a fool for a client. I am found guilty. Yet it could be worse; I am fined only a hundred dollars. I could have been put in the county jail for six months. Furthermore, I've just sold a horror story, "The Float," to a girlie mag called Adam. The check comes just in time to pay my fine.

The following day, when I arrive at work, Ellen is smiling a smile that tells me the elevator of bad fortune has not quite finished descending. She tells me she wasn't aware that funerals were held in Bangor District Court. It turns out that a relative of Ellen's—a cousin, nephew, something like that—was next on the docket following the disposition of my case. In one of those fantastic pranks of bad luck that seem to occur only when you're on a complete roll, this miscreant, who knew me by sight from the gas station, had mentioned seeing me.

And that is how I found myself unemployed and with a criminal record a month shy of my twenty-third birthday. I began wondering if I was going to turn out to be a Really Bad Person. Being a Really Bad Person is a shitty job, but somebody has to do it, I reasoned. Perhaps stealing traffic cones was only my first step downward. I think that was the summer I realized that we are really not all stars of

our own show, and that happy endings—even happy middles, for God’s sake—are absolutely in doubt.